

To reduce hunger in an age of globalization, should we first improve governance at the global or national level? Improved global governance is often assumed to be the greater need, yet in the area of food security the greatest governance deficits are still found at the level of the nation-state. Where national governments have performed well in the developing world, hunger has been significantly reduced. In those regions where hunger is not yet under control, improving governance at the national level is now the highest priority.

PERSISTENT HUNGER AND WEAK GLOBALIZATION

Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia stand out as the two developing-country regions where the prevalence of human malnutrition remains high: 34 percent in Africa and 23 percent in South Asia. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the total number of hungry people climbs each year. Improved global governance is not an efficient answer to the distinctive problems of these two regions, in part because of their relatively weak connections to the international markets and private investment flows that define modern globalization. Food markets within South Asia are significantly disconnected from global food markets, often as a matter of national policy. In pursuit of "self-sufficiency" the South Asian nations have restricted trade so much that imports now satisfy only about 2 percent of their total grain consumption. Flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into South Asia have traditionally been restricted as well, so in 1998 they were still only 5 percent as large as FDI flows into Latin America and the Caribbean.

Connections to the modern global economy are also weak for many African countries. International commodity markets continue to expand, yet Africa's sales into those markets continue to shrink. Africa's total volume of exported farm commodities (coffee, groundnuts, palm oil, and sugar) is actually smaller today than it was thirty years ago. Of the FDI going into the developing world as a whole, less than 1 percent goes to Sub-Saharan Africa.

So in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where serious hunger persists, the modern forces of globalization remain surprisingly weak. Stronger international governance of global markets and investments is therefore unlikely to have a great impact on hunger in these regions.

FOOD SECURITY AND STRONG GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

In those domains where stronger international governance can make a difference for food security, global institutions with

significant capabilities already exist. For famine early warning and emergency food aid, a substantial global governance capability exists within institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), and also within some regional institutions such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This international food aid system has performed well in most emergency situations, particularly since the drought in southern Africa in 1991–92. It has tended to break down only in cases where recipient-country governments conceal problems (as did Ethiopia in 1984) or block international access (North Korea after 1995), or in cases where an internal war is underway (as in Sudan).

Global governance in the area of international agricultural research is also quite well developed, through the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The research centers of the CGIAR have been operating for several decades now to generate scientific and technical innovations usable by poor farmers in developing countries. At the international level, this system has a strong record of performance; unfortunately, the national agricultural research systems (NARS) of many poor countries have not been supported or funded adequately by their own governments to function as capable partners of the CGIAR centers.

FOOD SECURITY AND IMPROVED NATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, improved national governance is most needed today to reduce hunger. Democracy is one useful standard of good governance, but improved national governance for food security need not begin or end with democratization. Nondemocratic governments such as in China, or predemocratic governments such as in South Korea and Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s, have also been able to bring large numbers of people out of hunger quickly. In China after 1978, a nondemocratic regime led by Deng Xiaoping introduced market incentives and individual household land contracts into the nation's farming sector, and made substantial public investments in agricultural research and rural roads. Partly as a consequence of these state actions, China's total grain output increased by 65 percent over the next two decades. Incomes in the countryside increased along with farm productivity, and the number of Chinese people living in poverty fell in two decades from 250 million to only 34 million.

For the purpose of reducing poverty and hunger, the most important starting point for judging good governance at the national level is a government's performance in providing basic public goods to all of its citizens, including those in rural areas.

These essentials include internal peace, rule of law, and public investment in infrastructure and research. Where hunger is on the rise today, for example in much of rural Sub-Saharan Africa, some of the most basic public goods needed for income growth and food security are being underprovided by national governments.

- **Internal peace.** National governments in Africa must do a better job of preserving internal peace. Over a recent period, 13 of the world's 20 most violent conflicts were in African states. Where national governments fail to preserve internal peace, food production and access to food are compromised.
- **Rule of law.** The prosperity of Africa has also suffered recently because weak civil and criminal justice systems or arbitrary and corrupt governmental administration have tended to discourage private investment. Because internal rule of law is so weak, Africans themselves have recently opted to locate 37 percent of their wealth outside the continent.
- **Public investment in rural infrastructure.** Such investments are weak in Africa, reducing the life chances of the rural poor. More than 91 percent of Africans in the poorest income quintile live in rural settings, and very few of these poor rural households enjoy the basic infrastructure needed for a healthy and productive life. Only 2 percent have in-house water, only 1 percent have sewers, and total road density for rural dwellers in Africa is only one-sixth the average of Asia.
- **National government support for agricultural research.** Between 1971 and 1991, public spending on agricultural research and development in Africa increased at only one-fifth the average rate for the rest of the developing world, despite the worrisome fact that both food production per capita and the productivity of farm labor in Africa were declining. In Asia, where public agricultural research investments by national governments have been stronger, improved technologies have reached farmers and average farm worker productivity and income have increased. In Africa, between 1980 and 1997, average agricultural value-added per farm worker actually declined by 9 percent.

FOREIGN ASSISTANCE FOR PUBLIC GOODS INVESTMENTS

When national governments lag in providing the minimum public goods needed to assure rural prosperity and food security for their own citizens, can outsiders help make up the resulting governance deficit? International laws and norms regarding state sovereignty have traditionally restricted the freedom of outsiders to intervene in the internal affairs of other states, even when those states fail to provide their own citizens with basic public goods. Increased investments can, however, be supported financially from the outside. Affluent outsiders should do much more to help governments in poor countries finance rural roads, health and education services,

and public agricultural research. Bilateral donors and international financial institutions such as the World Bank have in recent decades slighted such investments, concentrating instead on loans to governments in return for promises of market-oriented “policy reform.” The policy reforms purchased (or rented) in this fashion have too often been superficial, incomplete, or only temporary. Outsiders are correct to call for market-oriented policy reforms, but not if it means reduced assistance for more tangible investments in doctors, clinics, teachers, schools, scientists, laboratories, irrigation maintenance, electricity, and roads.

A PARTNERSHIP ROLE FOR NGOS

When national governments—or donors—fail to provide basic public goods, is it possible for NGOs to step in to do the job? In the area of rural poverty reduction and food security, NGOs work best when they are partnering with governments, rather than trying to replace them. If governments are willing to invest in rural infrastructure, NGOs can provide essential help mobilizing local participation in both the planning and construction phases of rural road, water, or power projects. Local participation is usually key to ensuring affordable maintenance and successful management of public goods, through a greater sense of local ownership. NGO participation can also help governments target their public investments more effectively toward the poor. But in most cases both the financial resources and the authority to act will have to come from the public sector.

NGOs are good at many things, but they have not yet demonstrated an ability to keep or restore peace in divided societies, and they have not been able, on their own, to establish the rule of law or make significant investments in infrastructure and research. It was national governments and donors, not NGOs, that provided most of the essential public goods that are now making rapid hunger reduction possible in East Asia.

THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

We are often told we must “think globally, act locally.” This is good advice for some truly global issues (such as HIV or climate change) but in the area of food security, thinking globally has its limits. Despite globalization, most hunger today is still highly localized and locally generated. Local problems such as poor rural infrastructure, little access to health services or education, gender or ethnic or caste discrimination, landlessness, governmental weakness or corruption, and violent internal conflict, are problems difficult to address at the global level. Most of these local problems must be corrected through improved governmental performance at the national level, one state at a time. So for the purpose of improving food security today, our first governance motto should be “think locally, then act nationally.”

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This brief is based on the 2020 Vision Discussion Paper of the same title.

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